

Identifying Barriers to Graduation for Latinos in the South Hennepin Region

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Hennepin South Services Collaborative (HSSC)

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Executive Summary

A. Introduction

This study was prepared for Hennepin South Services Collaborative (HSSC) to provide an assessment of barriers to high school graduation for Latino students in the South Hennepin Region and to identify strengths of the current systems. Because Latino students in South Hennepin (Richfield, Bloomington, and Eden Prairie) have significantly lower rates of high school graduation compared to White students, HSSC was interested in conducting research to identify barriers to Latino school success, assess Latino student and parent needs, and find examples of efforts that are successful in encouraging Latino student success.

The basis for this research is outlined in the HSSC 2003-2004 work plan. The work plan, based on the results of community strategic planning in early 2003, includes goals in the area of *School Success/School Readiness: Families feel welcome in communities and schools*. The results of this research will be shared by key community groups in spring of 2004 and posted on the Hennepin South Services Collaborative website (www.shfsc.org).

This investigation bases its direction and recommendations on the assumption that positive collaboration between schools, families, and social service agencies promotes greater academic success for Latino students. This study aims to present personal perspectives of Latino students and their families, highlight the strengths and challenges in school districts to meet the needs of the growing Latino population, and propose recommendations on best practices.

This report primarily focuses on the information gathered from Latino students, parents, teachers, advocates, and school administrators. They were asked questions such as: 1) How do Latino high school students experience high school? 2) Do parents feel comfortable and welcome in the school? 3) What are some challenges schools face while working to serve Latino students and families? and 4) What can communities and school districts learn from each other in terms of supporting Latino students and families?

The information gathered for this research project came from multiple sources. These included: 1) A focus group with Latino parents from Richfield; 2) Focus groups with Latino students from Richfield and Bloomington; 3) Interviews with teachers, administrators, a Latino Cultural Liaison, and Outreach Workers from Richfield, Bloomington and Eden Prairie; and 4) Existing research on Latino graduation rates in the three districts.

B. Discussions and Conclusions

The overall need to address the problem of Latino dropouts from high school in South Hennepin County appears to be growing. Much of this is due to the gap in communication and collaboration between schools, parents, and communities. It is also

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due to the lack of sufficient bilingual staff in these school districts. This study highlights personal perspectives and experiences of students, parents and school staff members who work with Latino families to facilitate an impetus for change within school districts and communities.

As the Latino population continues to grow in South Hennepin and in Minnesota as a whole, the problem will only be magnified if not addressed. Luckily, it seems that the majority of people directly or indirectly involved in this issue demonstrate a positive willingness and desire to approach the problem with the idea of collaboration in mind. All parties who participated in this study made known their eagerness to listen to suggestions and volunteer their time and skills in order to promote Latino academic success.

Through focus groups and individual interviews, the researcher compiled a list of recommendations made by the interviewees to address the issue. These are 10 Best Practices that communities and schools can adapt to their current system to support the Latino population as well as enhance cultural sensitivity and competency. They are as follows:

- 1) Employ more bilingual and culturally competent staff members.
- 2) Work to promote integration of students of all races and cultures in the classroom and in the school as a whole.
- 3) Enhance parental involvement through meetings that focus on the success of Latino students and through opportunities for volunteerism.
- 4) Send bilingual student progress notes home to parents weekly or bi-weekly.
- 5) Host orientation meetings that inform parents of school policies on enrollment, attendance, and transportation with interpreters provided.
- 6) Organize and promote Latino peer groups and parent groups.
- 7) Implement strategies to embrace Latino students starting in elementary school and continuing on through high school.
- 8) Create after-school programs with bilingual staff to assist Latinos with homework.
- 9) Invite participation of Latino students in school activities like Yearbook Staff and Student Government and extracurricular activities such as student dances and sports.
- 10) Provide students early in high school with information on opportunities for high school graduates.

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I. Introduction: Purpose of Research

This study was prepared for Hennepin South Services Collaborative (HSSC) to provide an assessment of barriers to high school graduation for Latino students in the South Hennepin Region. Because Latino students in South Hennepin (Richfield, Bloomington, and Eden Prairie) have significantly lower rates of high school graduation than White students, HSSC was interested in conducting research to identify barriers to Latino school success, assess Latino student and parent needs, and find examples of efforts that are successful in encouraging Latino student success.

The basis for this research is outlined in the HSSC 2003-2004 work plan. The work plan, based on the results of community strategic planning in early 2003, includes goals in the area of School Success/School Readiness. From the HSSC 2003-2004 work plan:

Goal: Families feel welcome in communities and schools.

Action Steps:

1. Host a forum of community leaders to share best practice models for welcoming newcomers to communities and schools.
2. Identify indicators of welcoming institutions.
3. Evaluate progress on indicators.

The results of this research will be shared by key community groups in Spring of 2004 and posted on the Hennepin South Services Collaborative website (www.shfsc.org).

This investigation bases its direction and recommendations on the assumption that positive collaboration between schools, families, and social service agencies promotes greater academic success for Latino students. This study aims to present personal perspectives of Latino students and their families, highlight the strengths and challenges in school districts to meet the needs of the growing Latino population, and propose recommendations on best practices.

II. Research Methodology

The research for this project was gathered in September, October and November of 2003 and was written in the month of December. The project took place in a number of settings with numerous participants. There were three focus groups conducted with parents and students and individual interviews directed with school staff members.

A. Preparation and Process

Prior to beginning the study, HSSC staff representing the communities of Richfield, Bloomington and Eden Prairie provided the researcher with names of primary contacts within each city and school district who have worked or are working directly and indirectly with Latino students and families. The researcher was also provided with information on previous research published on the topic as well as quantitative data demonstrating statistics for the region as well as the state.

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The first focus group was conducted on September 30th, 2003 with Latino parents. Focus group participants were mothers of different aged students in Richfield ranging from elementary school to high school. The focus group was semi-structured and the duration was approximately 2 hours. These mothers typically attend an English class at the same time and place the focus group was scheduled. The researcher was allowed time to facilitate the group with any mother willing to participate in the discussion. The mothers were notified of the focus group weeks in advance and were prepared to discuss the topic of Latino school success.

The following two focus groups involved Latino students. These groups consisted of both female and male ninth through twelfth graders enrolled in ESL classes, mainstream classes or both. The first was conducted on October 30th, 2003 with students from Richfield High School. The Outreach Worker from R.H.S. informally recruited these participants only earlier that week. They were asked to participate the evening of parent-teacher conferences while their parents were involved in a meeting regarding Latino students. This allowed the researcher access to a number of student participants who may not have joined in the discussion under any other circumstance. The focus group was highly informal and unstructured and lasted approximately 2 hours. The students were lively and energetic and seemed excited to be talking about “their issues”. Present in the room were the students and one facilitator. No representatives from the school were involved in the discussion at any point.

The second focus group was conducted on November 20th, 2003 at Bloomington’s John F. Kennedy High School. The focus group took place during Latino Club; a weekly group meeting for Latino students. The researcher was invited by the Latino Cultural Liaison who works for the Bloomington School District and directs the club. The Liaison informed the students of the agenda, weeks before, in order to prepare the students. The focus group was semi-structured with full participation and lasted approximately one hour. The researcher was assisted by the Latino Cultural Liaison in the facilitation of the group.

In each focus group, the researcher asked informal open-ended questions with an opportunity for every participant to respond. The groups were also staged so that after each question, time was allowed for general discussions or additions to responses. All the focus groups were facilitated in Spanish with some respondents choosing to use some English. The discussions were taped with verbal permission from the participants to be used for review, transcription and translation.

In addition to focus groups, the researcher also formally and informally interviewed many school faculty members who work with Latino students. These included: an ESL teacher, a Science teacher, two principles, one vice principle, two social workers, two Outreach Workers, a Latino Cultural Liaison, and a contracted district interpreter. The degree to which each interviewee works with Latino students and in what capacity varies greatly and demonstrates a host of differing opinions and ideas among the responses.

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In all, the researcher interviewed 10 mothers, 28 students, and 11 faculty members for this study.

B. Study Weaknesses

As the project was time-limited (the duration of the study was four months), the researcher was limited in the number of focus groups and interviews that could be completed. This study may not depict a complete or accurate account of the Latino experience in the South Hennepin Region as the information was gathered from voluntary participants. Perspectives of those who did not feel comfortable participating in the focus groups as well as those who could not participate (i.e. parents that work during the day or students that have already dropped out) will not be presented and may have provided valuable information.

The majority of the data compiled comes from Richfield and Bloomington. Less information was collected from Eden Prairie, as it was difficult to find a large number of Latino contacts. This is due to the lower number of Latino residents that have children in the school district comparable to the other two cities. The time spent gathering information from Eden Prairie was also limited, as it was the last city to focus on in the study.

C. Demographics of Participants

The mothers as well as the students that participated in the focus groups were primarily Spanish speaking with some participants having fair to proficient English skills. The majority were Mexican born, but some were from Central and South America; each having lived in the United States anywhere from several months to many years. A few students were born in the U.S. and were citizens. Throughout the focus groups, some mothers voluntarily informed the researcher they had undocumented immigrant status. Similarly, a large number of students proclaimed they were undocumented immigrants when the discussion turned to the lack of future education and employment possibilities.

Also important to note for this study is the disclosure of educational attainment by the parents. The mothers described their level of education, as well as their husband's level, as ranging from no education at all to high school and higher; but many having minimal education (up to 8th grade equivalency). The students also reiterated this when discussing their parents' impact on their own education and future plans, stating that none of their parents went to college and some didn't finish high school.

III. Previous Studies and Existing Research

HSSC partners represent the communities of Bloomington, Richfield and Eden Prairie. According to 2000 US Census data, Richfield has one of the largest Latino populations in Minnesota (2,158 or 6.3% of the total population in Richfield). Bloomington and Eden Prairie are also home to a number of Latinos residents (2,290 or 2.7% in Bloomington and 862 or 1.6% in Eden Prairie). (<http://factfinder.census.gov>, retrieved on 07/03/03)

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According to a longitudinal study by the Minnesota Department of Children, Families and Learning (CFL) Latino students in Minnesota were less likely than White students to graduate high school in 2001 (46.7% of Latino students graduated in 2001 compared to 82.5% of White students). Table 1 shows the graduation rates from the three districts for students who started the ninth grade in 1997.

Table 1. Latino Graduation Rates for Bloomington, Eden Prairie and Richfield*

| City | Graduation Rate for Latino Students |
|--------------|-------------------------------------|
| Bloomington | 53.9% |
| Eden Prairie | 88.9% |
| Richfield | 50.5% |

*Source: HACER (2003). Latino High School Graduation Rates in Minnesota: The Class of 2001 At-A-Glance.

IV. Current Laws Dealing with Bilingual and Undocumented Immigrants

There are three laws that impact many Latino students and families and are necessary for schools, parents and communities to fully understand and adapt as integral to curriculum. The first two laws detail language rights issues (Migrant Legal Action Program, Inc., provided by Resource Center of the Americas on 10/31/03) and the third law deals with undocumented children and young adults (National Coalition of Advocates for Students, provided by Resource Center of the Americas on 10/31/03).

Lau V. Nichols, 414 U.S. 563 (1974)

The U.S. Supreme Court held (1) that discrimination on the basis of language proficiency is discrimination on the basis of national origin under Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and (2) that treating people with different needs in the same way is not equal treatment.

Castaneda V. Pickard, 648 F.2d 989 (5th Cir. 1981)

The Court of Appeals articulated a three-part test for assessing a school system's treatment of limited English proficient students. The standard required (1) a sound approach to the education of these students, (2) reasonable implementation of the approach, and (3) outcomes reflecting that the approach is working.

Plyler V. Doe 457 U.S. 202 (1982)

This law states that undocumented children and young adults have the same right as U.S. citizens and permanent residents to attend public primary and secondary schools. *The National Coalition of Advocates for Students* outlines "Plyler" by stating that like other children, undocumented students are required under state laws to attend school until they reach a legally mandated age. As a result of this ruling, public schools may **not**:

- deny admission to a student during initial enrollment or at any other time on the basis of undocumented status;
- treat a student differently to verify residency;
- engage in any practices that "chill" or hinder the right of access to school;
- require students or parents to disclose or document their immigration status;
- make inquiries of students or parents that may expose their undocumented status;

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- require social security numbers as a requirement for admission to school, as this may expose undocumented status.

V. Content of Study

A. Parent Focus Group Findings:

Among the information gathered from the parent focus group, two primary themes emerged: 1) Language and Communication and 2) Culture and Transition. As one mother simply stated, “It’s obvious, language is the number one barrier”. The majority of the Latino parents in this focus group, as well as in South Hennepin Region, speak Spanish as their primary language making communication a great challenge. While parents wish to give their children opportunity to be successful in school and in the community, they find difficulty in supporting and advocating for them without proficient English skills. Whether the need is to call the school to say their child will be absent or to assist their child in homework activities, lacking English skills limits their ability to do so. Many parents rely on help from an English speaking friend, their child, or an interpreter to communicate with the school.

Schools, on the other hand, are required by law to serve non-English speaking students; which also includes serving their parents or caregivers. Because many schools have only a few bilingual teachers and faculty, schools are limited in their ability to support Spanish-speaking students and families. In South Hennepin Region schools, there may be only one staff member in a district that works with Latino parents or students. This worker may divide his/her time up between two or more schools in the district, attempting to serve all the Latino students and parents with needs from many schools. The mother who participated in the focus group said they are grateful for the worker, understand his busy schedule, but believe the schools are not providing enough support for Spanish speakers. As a result, children are suffering because they are receiving unequal services necessary for academic success. Aside from the one staff member, these mothers could not identify anyone else within the school district with whom they could communicate. If the one staff member is unable to be reached or is not in the building at the time, their issues or concerns may not be addressed.

Safety concerns for children were noted when discussing communication gaps. One mother describes an account where her young child came home from school with scratches on his face. The school did not notify her as to what happened that day and she felt too nervous and timid to call the school to find out. This mother felt that the school most likely would have called her if she were an English speaker. In the past, this mother had attempted to communicate with the school, but was unsuccessful. She called the school, waited to be transferred to a Spanish speaker but never was connected. As this mother told her story, most of the other mothers in this group nodded their heads, gesturing familiarity with the experience. Eventually, other stories similar to this one were told throughout the discussion.

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Communication between parents and schools not only can affect the children in terms of student safety issues, but also frequently affects them academically. There is a great deal of concern about parent awareness of academic achievement. These mothers expressed a sense that there is a lack in notification of behavior issues, poor or positive progress, or incompleteness of assignments. Not until the point of suspension or failure of a class, is the parent contacted. These parents consequently rely heavily on their children to update them on their own progress, however realize their children may not be the most reliable source.

This overriding concern for the lack of knowledge of student progress and of resources that allow parents to be the best advocates for their children is a result of feeling left in the dark when it comes to their child's education. One suggestion to address the communication issue is for teachers to send home notes in Spanish commenting on homework, missing assignments, and general progress. This could potentially alleviate some stress and preoccupation for their child's academic achievement and well being in school.

Also mentioned were notable differences in methods of support among the elementary and middle schools and the high school. A mother of a high school student stated that "there is absolutely no communication among the Latino parents and the high school". When their children were younger, they felt they had more support from the elementary and middle schools. Many of the mothers who have children in high school now, remembered certain helpful methods used by the elementary and middle schools to support non-English speaking parents. One example was sending a notice home in Spanish during the summer for the parent-orientation meeting. The school would then host the meeting in Spanish and English to prepare parents for the upcoming year, explain expectations and policies of the school, and provide parents with useful resources and contacts within the school. "Most people (Latinos) find out by word of mouth which school they need to go to and in what area. But, Centennial put out pamphlets in Spanish and in English and that was very helpful. It said to go to the Center on Elliot Street to register. It was a very good idea and was very easy for Latino parents to understand".

Another communication tool believed to be helpful is the absentee phone line used in the middle school. This line has the option to leave a message in Spanish if a child is going to be absent from school due to illness or any other excused absence. Parents with children currently in middle school also reiterated the usefulness of this mechanism. This tool helps minimize anxiety from calling the school and worrying whether or not the parent will be connected with a Spanish speaker.

Culture and Transition

Not only does Language create barriers to facilitating academic success for Latino students, but cultural differences and the transition from one culture to another also provide obstacles. The majority of the mothers interviewed are foreign born and some arrived to the U.S. only recently. Reasons for coming to the U.S were listed as needing to escape poverty or dangerous situations and the desire to give their family and their

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children a better life. They understand that the school system in the U.S. is very different from what they experienced in their countries of origin. As mentioned earlier, some have little to no education and find the U.S. school system to be very complex. The researcher asked the parents to remember their first contact with the school and describe it. Many of the mothers told stories that illustrate the lack of knowledge of U.S. school policy regarding laws on attendance and on the registration process. A number of parents assumed that a parent could simply take a child to the nearest school and enroll them.

Primary misconceptions of the U.S. school system were around issues of immunization records, past school records, and the law prohibiting schools from requiring Social Security numbers for registration purposes. When entering the school for the first time, the mothers described the schools as very nice and helpful, for the most part, but repeatedly found scarcity in the schools' provision of Spanish speaking faculty to facilitate the process. Some parents who were warned about the lack of bilingual faculty brought along their own "interpreter", which allowed for a more expeditious process.

Being a foreign born resident in the U.S. with limited English skills and the experience of living in a culture other than the Majority culture enhances the struggle to thrive. Mothers from this focus group understand that their situation as either documented or undocumented residents affects their child's academic achievement. Socioeconomic status was listed as a major determinant in academic success. A large number of families of Latino students may include two full-time working parents or a full-time working single-parent headed household. Full-time work can also mean working at two or more places of employment usually equaling more than forty hours. The numerous hours spent at work may lessen the parent's ability to be active in school activities, homework, and parent-teacher conferences even though involvement is desired.

In concluding the parent focus group, the mothers offered some specific suggestions for addressing issues regarding Latino academic achievement. These included: more interpreters in the schools; the need for parents to learn English; more contacts with teachers other than at conferences; and sending home progress notes in Spanish by the teachers every week or every other week to notify parents of student progress, attendance, punctuality, etc.

B. Student Focus Group Findings:

The researcher facilitated two focus groups with high school students, one at Richfield High School and one at John F. Kennedy High School. The students were asked the same questions. Three main themes emerged from these two focus groups. They include: 1) Integration and Culture, 2) Language, and 3) Importance of Graduation. The students also provided suggestions to the school on how to improve academic success for Latinos.

When asked of the students to describe how they experience high school, many used words such as exclusion, racism, inferiority, division, and isolation. The students elaborated by explaining that Latinos were isolated from the Majority due to their language and cultural differences. There is no integration between race and culture

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among the students in the classroom. These students also did not believe administrators were attempting to promote integration within the school as a whole either. When asked how they propose administrators correct the problem of segregation, one student said, “They need to first act as if we exist. They act like we’re not even here. There are like 200 Latino students in this school and they don’t even act like we’re here”.

Latino students wish to participate in more school activities but have felt excluded in the past. Activities such as Yearbook Staff, Student Government, sports, and student dances were cited as examples. One student told the story of his process to join the soccer team. He started by asking the coach how to join. Due to difficulty in communication, the coach told the student to find a teacher that could speak Spanish. The teacher was not available which ultimately delayed the process. The student had returned numerous times to connect with both the teacher and the coach but was unsuccessful. When communication finally occurred and the student was able to fulfil the requirements for permission letters, medical records, and payment of fees, try-outs were over, the roster was filled and the student was denied the opportunity to play on the team.

The word “racism” was spoken loudly in one focus group and was lively debated in the other. Students feel that many White students and some faculty are racist and discriminating towards Latinos. These students believe they are treated poorly because of language and cultural differences. “When we’re in the hallway and we’re talking in Spanish, people will look at us like we’re doing something wrong and they’ll say, ‘that’s rude and disrespectful to be speaking in Spanish’”. One student said she felt that it was racism “not like they “hate us” kind of racism, but that they think we are stupid and don’t know anything.

Language, again, is a prominent theme discussed in the focus group with the students. The majority of Latino students declared they were mostly in ESL classes, with some in regular mainstream classes and a few in a combination of the two. Students explained that certain classes were extremely difficult for students that had limited English. Those mentioned were math, social studies, and history. Math was named “the hardest class” by all the students. “History is hard because we don’t know anything about American history. The other students already know a lot about their history and the teachers expect us to already know certain things”. On the other hand, ESL classes for certain students seem very easy. “I don’t like the ESL classes because it feels like we’re learning material we learned in elementary school with pictures, puzzles, and numbers and it’s really boring”.

The researcher asked the students in what ways they felt supported in the school as Latinos. Each group named only one person from each district who is bilingual and could assist them with academic and personal issues. They attributed some Latino student failure with the schools lack of Spanish speaking faculty. Students said that many of them weren’t sure how many credits they needed to graduate or what classes they were missing because they don’t have a typical school counselor that could assist them with scheduling and credit requirements. They are grateful for the Outreach Worker but believe that the school needs more faculty members that can speak Spanish. One Richfield student said,

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“The only person we can go to is Debbie. She helps us with everything. Like she helps with classes and everything. Like, all the Latino issues, she helps with. I feel bad because I don’t think we thank her enough for all she does. She really works hard for us.” The same was true at J.F.K in Bloomington. The students were glad to have the Latino Cultural Liaison as a support and advocate, but felt the school wasn’t providing adequate bilingual staff for Latino student needs.

Although Latino students graduate at rates much lower than White students in South Hennepin, the desire to graduate for these students was as strong as any other average high school student. Every Latino student in these groups undoubtedly wished to graduate from high school one day, but the reality of graduation for some was questionable. As described earlier, many students were not sure where they stood in terms of credits and graduation standards. Some believed they were very behind in credits and didn’t know ways of making them up. Unfortunately, the option of summer school is not feasible for most students, as work is either necessary or required in order to support the family income.

Educational and employment opportunity for many of these Latino students, especially undocumented students, is limited, but perhaps the lack of information and awareness of opportunities creates an even more dismal picture. When asked what students wanted to do after they graduated, one student responded seriously, “What are our options?” The motivation to go to college for some was there, but the prospect of paying for college without eligibility of in-state tuition or financial assistance is sobering.

In both focus groups, when the discussion of opportunities after graduation arose, students had many questions. “Do you need a Social Security number to join the Army”? “Are there scholarships for Latinos who do well in school?” “Besides going to a University, what are some other things we can do?” These questions sparked conversation, and consensus was formed of the need for schools to provide information to students of opportunities after graduation. They believed that students drop out because they feel there is nothing they can do besides continue to work at their current job. Without seeing the benefits of graduating from high school, motivation to do so is lost.

Student suggestions were offered for ways in which schools could better support Latinos and provide realistic ways to obtain a high school diploma. These included: more bilingual and culturally competent teachers and faculty; after-school bilingual help to work on homework; more activities and programs for Latinos to get together to talk about racial and cultural issues; make activities like dances more equal in terms of participation; and more integration of racial groups in the classroom.

C. Individual Interviews and Faculty Input:

From the many interviews with individuals who work directly and indirectly with Latino students, came various themes. It became apparent that these themes were almost identical to the themes identified in the focus groups with both parents and students.

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These themes included: lacking sufficient bilingual staff, challenges to fostering parental involvement with the school, and integration of students into the Majority culture.

Two in-depth interviews involved were conducted with an Outreach Worker from Richfield School District and a Latino Cultural Liaison from the Bloomington School District. These interviews provided the researcher information from staff members who work directly with Latino students and parents and are viewed by the schools and the families as THE contact person for Latinos in the district.

Both interviewees stressed the importance of promoting parental involvement by the school and making parents feel comfortable and welcome. It is believed that if parents have the knowledge and resources to adequately navigate the school system, students will more likely be successful. Suggestions were offered for getting parents more involved in the school by sending pamphlets and notices home for parents in both Spanish and English and inviting parents to parent-teacher conferences explaining that interpreters will be readily available.

There was agreement by both interviewees that parents as well as schools are willing to work on promoting greater Latino academic achievement, but believed that the gap in communication must be addressed as a first step. Certain schools in South Hennepin are finding answers through hosting meetings with faculty and Latino parents geared toward bridging the communication gap between schools and Latinos. Once both parties work together to identify needs and address problems, Latino students can start to feel that their success is as important as the success of all other students in the school.

The interviewees also expressed the desire and willingness by parents to do volunteer work, attend meetings for Latino parents, and act as interpreters for the school if necessary. This was also reiterated in the parent focus group. Like one parent stated, “This (problem) doesn’t need to completely be the responsibility of the school. We are willing to do what we can. We just need to work together”. One mother suggested that a parent could volunteer in the school office to speak Spanish or interpret if needed.

Parental involvement is important but is not the only determinant for academic success. The Outreach Worker stressed the importance of integrating and embracing the Latino students when they are young. Kindergarten through fifth grade is the time when students decide whether they like school or not. By the time they reach middle school, kids have already been labeled either a “good student” or a “bad student”. It is difficult to change that label and oftentimes paves way for a path of success or of failure. Therefore, strategies to encourage achievement should start in the early school years and continue on through high school.

The development of specific cultural peer groups is noted as a positive direction taken by the school districts in South Hennepin. The interviewees, along with students and parents, express their support for groups like Latino Club in Bloomington. These promise to be safe places for students to discuss issues that concern Latinos as a group. They can also provide answers to questions in terms of school policies and assistance with homework.

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The researcher observed first hand the importance of Latino Club and the positive influences on Latino students. The Department of Equity in the Bloomington School District employs one Latino Cultural Liaison (L.C.L.) to oversee all Latino issues in the district. The task seems overwhelming, yet the L.C.L. demonstrates great drive and ability to make a difference for Latino students and families. After the formal focus group was finished, the L.C.L. spoke with the students about positive change among Latino students and about the school's desire for Latinos to reach their academic potential. "I want you guys to know something. Your school cares for you, not just J.F.K. but the Bloomington School District. If they didn't care for you, I wouldn't be here. Now, I know things are going really slow, but with the collaboration of your parents, yourselves and the school, it can make a difference". Knowing that they have a support and an advocate that is working towards their success can make a very big difference in these students' lives and in their academic performance.

D. Recommendations for Best Practices:

The majority of these recommendations come directly from suggestions made by parents, students, and faculty and have been described throughout this study. These 10 Best Practices for promoting Latino academic success and high school graduation represent ideas of the individuals most affected by this issue. The recommendations for action are as follows:

- 1) Employ more bilingual and culturally competent staff members.
- 2) Work to promote integration of students of all races and cultures in the classroom and in the school as a whole.
- 3) Enhance parental involvement through meetings that focus on the success of Latino students and through opportunities for volunteerism.
- 4) Send bilingual student progress notes home to parents weekly or bi-weekly.
- 5) Host orientation meetings that inform parents of school policies on enrollment, attendance, and transportation with interpreters provided.
- 6) Organize and promote Latino peer groups and parent groups.
- 7) Implement strategies to embrace Latino students starting in elementary school and continuing on through high school.
- 8) Create after-school programs with bilingual staff to assist Latinos with homework.
- 9) Invite participation of Latino students in school activities like Yearbook Staff and Student Government and extracurricular activities like student dances and sports.

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- 10) Provide students early in high school with information on opportunities for high school graduates.

VI. Conclusion

This study describes multiple barriers for Latino graduation by highlighting major gaps in communication between schools, students and parents. Language, lack in bilingual staff, and segregation and isolation of Latino students were three prominent barriers noted. The study also provides suggestions for ways in which schools could provide more adequate services to meet the needs of Latinos.

One of the most positive findings in this project was the display of willingness by all parties to work together and collaborate on strategies in order to create change. Many of the suggestions made throughout the study are methods already employed in some schools in South Hennepin and have been successful. Knowing the support by parents, students and faculty for what has worked in the past and what methods and programs should continue may be helpful for schools and communities when deciding the best use of funding. This study's goal has been to present personal perspectives and recommendations by those most affected by the low graduation rates of Latinos and consequently, create an impetus for change.

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